

NATIONAL SERVICE: Every Citizen Plays a Part

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Citizenship is an attitude, a state of mind, an emotional conviction that the whole is greater than the part . . . and that the part should be humbly proud to sacrifice itself that the whole may live.¹

This quote from the fictional high school teacher, Col Dubois, is taken from the book *Starship Troopers*. The quote relays the theme of the book and the significance of creating a strong country physically and mentally. From little on, children are taught in science that the whole is stronger than the sum of its parts. This theory can also hold true for a nation. In today's fast-paced, impatient American society, more and more citizens are growing up focused on themselves and their individual well-being. With these self-absorbed perceptions instilled in today's working world, its leaders, and their rising subordinates, the idea of country unity is left behind. These perceptions show a growing lack of commitment to national sovereignty and the unified strength of America. Implementing a national service plan in the United States would yield significant social and economic benefits in this rapidly changing country.

Current National Service Opportunities

"The basis of all morality is duty, a concept with the same relation to group that self-interest has to individual . . . the

¹ Robert A. Heinlein, *Starship Troopers* (New York: ACE, 1987), 163.

society they [kids] were in told them endlessly about their 'rights.'"² Young adults today are raised to learn the "rights" they possess as Americans. However, more often these are the privileges that United States citizens have confused with rights. This attitude does not encourage people to work hard in order to reap the benefits of what they truly earned. It is also slowly poisoning society and causing a growing divide between income classes and racial groups.³ Police are seeing rising gang activity, and public school education (used largely by middle to lower class families in cities) is not fulfilling the standards that some of the suburban schools are setting. As of 2007, the nation's public-school system average shows that 38% of fourth graders are unable to read at a basic level.⁴ Benefits come in many unquantifiable forms such as job satisfaction or experienced-based knowledge, not just income.

The United States currently has viable programs in place to support national service. In 2002, President Bush created the USA Freedom Corps (USAFC), an office of the White House designed to oversee and expand volunteer service in America.⁵ The organizations that fall under USAFC include about 83,000

² Heinlein, *Starship Troopers*, 119.

³ Steven Waldman, "Nationalize National Service," Blueprint Magazine, April 1, 1999, <http://www.dlc.org/print.cfm?contentid=1448>.

⁴ Richard Stengel, "A Time to Serve," Time Magazine, August 30, 2007, <http://www.time.com/time/specials/2007/printout>.

⁵ USA Freedom Corps-Make a Difference. Volunteer, <http://www.usafreedomcorps.gov>.

citizens of all ages that serve in three AmeriCorps and individual community programs, with another 500,000 elderly volunteers who serve through the Senior Corps. The Peace Corps is recognized as another way to serve the country as it projects a positive American image around the globe. Additionally, individual states and communities present limitless opportunities to serve, including the national and state military services. Unfortunately, only the military holds a majority of full-time volunteers; most of the other programs are filled by part-time or specific-event volunteers.

According to a 2005 poll, 28.8% of Americans stated that they had volunteered through some organization at least once (to include a one-day project). Nevertheless, with the country reporting a population of about 300 million people, these numbers are disappointingly low. The 2007 census estimate showed that 16.6 % of U.S. citizens are between the ages of 18 and 29. That means 49,800,000 young Americans are beginning their careers or entering college at this time. Each year, another 2 million enter this age bracket.⁶ These are the years when social ideals are formed in future leaders. What better time would there be to serve 18-24 months of service to the country than during these years?

⁶U.S. Census Bureau, *Population Estimate*, Section 1, <http://www.census.gov/prod/2007pubs/08abstract/pop.pdf>.

The Need for Nation-wide National Service

Certainly, the purpose and need for mandatory national service is now more prevalent than ever as the country has entered an economic decline. For instance, countries around the world benefit from the industries that American companies cannot afford to keep in the United States. In large, these benefits are due to the cost of employing "privileged" Americans who think mostly of self, not country. "The key, as with the military, is that people are not brought together for the purpose of being brought together. They come together to solve a mutual problem. In the process, they become mutually dependent."⁷ The most recent example of a unified country with a common goal appeared after 9/11. Americans dropped the self-first attitude as victims' families were consoled, memorials were held, and all were eager to approve retribution for the attacks. This unity did not last long, which is no surprise for an impatient and short-term memory society. A system must be created to unify this country again. Its people need to work toward a common goal-something larger than each individual citizen.

⁷ Steven Waldman, "Nationalize National Service," Blueprint Magazine, April 1, 1999, <http://www.dlc.org/print.cfm?contentid=1448>.

"Every voter and officeholder is a man who has demonstrated through voluntary and difficult service that he places the welfare of the group ahead of personal advantage."⁸ However impatient and selfish Americans seem to be today, evidence exists that a national service program may thrive if implemented in the near future. Students are showing a propensity to want to "help out" through various mediums. Specifically, military recruiters are faced with higher recruiting missions and either come close to or meet these higher missions each year, even in the midst of the Global War on Terror. This all-volunteer force is built upon the young servicemen and women who want to serve their country in some capacity. Since 2002, when President Bush called upon Americans to volunteer, national service programs have been allotted funds to allow growth, and program organizers are successfully filling more positions.

Proposed National Service

President John F. Kennedy said, "And so my fellow Americans, ask not what your country can do for you; ask what you can do for your country." This attitude has been echoed throughout the White House since the birth of the nation. Every nation's leader recognizes the importance of national service, and each nation reflects that attitude in its own way through mandatory

⁸ Heinlein, *Starship Troopers*, 182.

or volunteer service opportunities. The United States would benefit if every able American serves his or her country (possibly for a minimum of 18 months to allow for training) sometime between the ages of 18 to 30. This service would help build national unity within the country and individual communities and teach young Americans to work together for a common goal. A national service program would bring citizens together from across a wide range of cultures and backgrounds as they work within the governmental organizations that make the country whole.

In 1991, Col Jules Hampton of the U.S. Army quoted a statement from the House of Representatives in the National and Community Service Act of 1990:

Polls indicate youth want to serve. . . There is a strong desire to serve others. The problem we face in America today is not a lack of willingness to serve or to help others but to find the appropriate outlet. . .⁹

This observation is still valid. Polls show that confidence in the government is low, but volunteerism and civic participation is at an all time high. The idea of community service is encouraged in most high schools and colleges today. Young people feel they can personally make a difference in the broken

⁹Col Jules W. Hampton, *National Service: A Responsibility, A Solution*, (U.S. Army War College:1991), 9.

government structure through community service.¹⁰ Therefore, the ideal place for introduction to future volunteer service opportunities is at the high school level. The information could be incorporated into the curriculum as a semester-long "Introduction to Volunteer Positions," or through individual visits by the different agencies throughout the year. This would encourage students to begin thinking about their volunteer opportunities early and would allow them to build skills for future educational or work opportunities. Service could occur before, during, or after college or other higher education, which would enable a citizen to improve or acquire occupational experience. In addition to honing skilled or gaining unskilled labor experience before beginning to work full-time, they would be serving the country.

Many proposals have been made to implement National Service in the past. Congress has considered several bills concerning national service, most recently the Universal National Service Act of 2007, but none have come close to approval.¹¹ While many countries (e.g. Israel, Germany, Norway) have mandatory service obligations, the United States has a long way to go to require such an obligation from its citizens. A more feasible approach would be to expand the volunteer opportunities to benefit more

¹⁰ Stengel, *A Time to Serve*.

¹¹ Thomas (Library of Congress), *Universal National Service Act of 2007*, H.R. 393, <http://thomas.loc.gov/cgi-bin/query/z?c110:H.R.393>.

government organizations and give citizens a wider range of positions from which to choose.

In order to implement volunteer national service, the government must offer strong incentives to entice volunteers for a specified length of government service. Some examples of incentives include tax-free income, property tax credit, free health care while serving, and free room and board plus stipends for full-time service (up to two years for those who choose to volunteer away from their places of residence). While removing people from the comfort of their hometowns helps to break down barriers and to create more unity, national service could be designed to allow participants to live in their hometowns, thus reducing the cost to the government of room and board.

Future financial benefits to the volunteer could be another positive benefit of national service. Post-service educational financial aid and first-time homeowner financial aid are monetary incentives that may be earned. If more financial aid was based on what has been earned rather than who has the "right" to receive aid, more money could be given to support national service. The United States government would save by using volunteers to complete many projects run by the Department of Energy, Education, Transportation, Forestry, Wildlife Services, and the USAFC organizations. Instead of granting

students federal financial aid based on gender, race, or grade point average alone, aid should become available after a term of service. The aid could thus be shifted for use as a volunteer incentive. The same holds true for the country's welfare plan; welfare benefits could be tied to a term of government service.

The Opposition

Those against mandated government service, especially service in the military, argue that the quality of the organizations may suffer if everyone is made to serve.¹² Leaders would also be challenged with volunteers who have a wider variety of backgrounds and work ethics. This is one downfall that most likely cannot be avoided without more administrative oversight and screening to ensure placement of volunteers in organizations best-suited to their skills. The federal and local administrative costs would rise initially, but the social, economic, and individual benefits over the long-term would be worth the cost.¹³

Another opponent, the private labor sector, believes an implemented national service plan would create a deficit of

¹² This statement stems from conversations with the EWS International Military Officers from Germany, which currently has mandatory military and non-military service, and Romania, which ceased mandated service in 2006 as agreed upon when it joined NATO in 2004. Since the Romanian officer has seen results of mandated and voluntary service, he can speak to the difference in attitude of the sailors with whom he works.

¹³ Waldman, "Nationalize National Service."

entry-level employees to fill positions for the first few years after its conception. The large number of recent graduates not entering the workforce would create a labor gap. However, with our nation's unemployment numbers at over seven percent and rising in the unforeseeable future, this argument may become invalid as employers seek to fill fewer positions.¹⁴ Economists also argue against mandatory service for reasons similar to employers. In general, they suggest that the value of the output of work as a volunteer would not outweigh the economic value of a person who is earning a full-time wage and returning it to the country's economy.¹⁵

Conclusion

The arguments for and against mandatory national service are all valid. However, the country is rapidly declining socially and economically. Solutions must be implemented soon. As the effects of national service will not be recognized for several years, America should not hesitate to make more voluntary service with incentives part of the solution. As generations pass and national service becomes an integral part of the proud claim to U.S. citizenship, the country will become a stronger place both socially and economically. As a result, a

¹⁴ Bureau of Labor Statistics, *Employment Situation Summary*, <http://www.bls.gov/news.release/empsit.nr0.htm>

¹⁵ The Becker-Posner Blog, "Universal National Service," September 2007. <http://www.becker-posner-blog.com/archives/2007/09/>.

stronger United States of America will contribute more to the global scene as a unified nation. The time to begin this transformation is now.

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